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## Evaluating Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* through Magic Realist Lenses

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#### Abstract

There is a growing interest in science fiction, afrofuturism, and supernatural tales. With this background, it is imperative that literary studies should identify and situate these narratives to enhance further scholarship. This paper examines Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* from the perspective of the generic family resemblance with magical realism. It seeks to identify the divergence and similarities between the genres and provides proof as to where this novel fits. The theoretical framework for the study is Magical Realism. The methodology is a textual analysis of *Children of Blood and Bone*. The findings of this paper prove that this novel is rooted, according to theory, into fantasy literature and not magical realism. The study concludes that Adeyemi's novel is highly commendable as a narrative and is malleable to different approaches.



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## 1.0 Introduction

*Children of Blood and Bone* is Tomi Adeyemi's first full length novel. She is Nigerian-American citizen born 1 August, 1993. This novel became a bestseller in the US in 2018, just after it was published. The story is full of refreshing insight into the imaginary world view of cosmological order in the land of Orisha. It presents a fresh perspective to the interface of fantasy and mythology. Adeyemi's fusion is interesting and original in its rendition. Through this combination, the reader discovers different conflicts arising in the story as the suspense builds to a riveting climax. Although this novel targets young readers; it is a delight for a reader of any age. This novel identifies the importance of the cosmological order of the Orisha people and how it shapes the astonishing events of the story.

## 2.0 Defining the Novel

Popular information has it that novels in which there is a recognizable world and the magical coexisting, are called fantasy, while novels in which the setting and characters are unrecognizable and imaginary are called high fantasy. This definition is flawed, because theorists like Bortolussi have studied these definitions and relationships closely: she states that:

With respect to the ontological nature of the fictional world, the three critics (Flores 1955; Leal; 1967 and Chanady 1985) argued that magic realism distinguished itself from other genres through its portrayal of a recognizably real world environment in which the magical occurrences are a normal part of reality. This was believed to differentiate magic realism from pure fantasy (the marvelous), whose fictional world is recognizably not our own, given that it is populated by creatures that don't exist in our world...the same feature was also thought to differentiate magical realism from fantastic literature, in which the real world is recognizably our own, but whose magical events are depicted as discordant with our conventional sense of reality (351).

Further research into the topic concludes that fantasy presents the recognizable world and the magical and the fantastic presents a world that is alien to our recognizable world. Magical realism distinguishes itself from fantasy because of the relationship of the acceptance of magical events and the attitude of the narrator. In magical realism, there

can be a presence of both resolved and unresolved antinomy. Antinomy is mostly concerned with how the narrator explains the magical events. The condition where magical events are perceived as being extraordinary, outlandish and unexpected is described as unresolved antinomy. Resolved antinomy is the condition where the magic is expressed simply and naturally as though it were an expected part of reality itself. In *Children of Blood and Bone*, on the ontological level of the characters, the magical powers and events become the main reason why conflict develops in the novel. In this novel, a twist ending occurs when antinomy is resolved because magic becomes embedded in all orishans. This final resolution of antinomy is classical for fantasy novels. In *Children of Blood and Bone*, antinomy is unresolved by all the first person narrators. This is not the only reason why this novel is fantasy.

There is a level of specificity and procedure in the workings of magic in the novel. For magic to happen, there are processes such as incantations and rituals. Magic does not happen arbitrarily. The scroll, the bone dagger, and the sunstone are objects required at the perfect time for the solstice. The ritual is performed in order to release magic in its full power for the maji of Orisha. Magic is a weapon that needs to be conjured by the maji so as to brandish it against the oppressive government of King Saran. The existence of magic is kept in a state of constant friction. The attempted destruction of the sacred objects proves impossible. After these artifacts wash ashore accidentally, they awaken the powers of the diviners. Admiral Ebele reports that:

When I ripped the scroll, it pieced itself back together. When I burnt it, it formed again from the ashes. I had my strongest guard take a mace to the sunstone, and it did not even sustain a scratch! When those wretched artifacts wouldn't break, I locked them in an iron chest and sank them in the middle of the Banjoko Sea. They could never have washed up on the coast!  
(41)

The sunstone is stolen but later found in the slums of Ibeji where miscreant soldiers of King Saran use it for as bait in a game of mortal combat. They extol it by calling it "the jewel of life" or "the gift of immortality (205)". To heighten the incentive, gold is also included as the prize for whichever captain will sink all other ships in the contest. The bone dagger is found at Chândomblé with Lekan, while the scroll is snatched away by Amari. Without these artifacts, magic will not return to Orisha. The presence of ashê in the blood of diviners draws magic when in contact with a source containing magical

powers. Adeyemi identifies ten maji clans and their distinctive powers. These classifications are easy to understand by the graphic presentations available in the preface. Another yardstick by which the mode of the story can be determined is the narrator. In magical realism, the narrator is ingenuous, and somewhat playful. In *Children of Blood and Bone* the narrators comprise of three major characters in the story: Zélie, Amari and Inan. Tzain and King Saran are also major characters who oscillate through the lives of the other three characters. All these characters take an authoritative stance. Zélie's point of view portrays her as a person forced into maturity by grief and anger after the death of her mother at the age of six. Her drive and inspiration stem from the added problem of living in an oppressive environment made even more precarious because of her natural features. Her silvery white hair identifies her as a maji. Her thoughts, actions and ruminations about the past reveal her character as strong, ambitious, wise, but impatient. Mama Agba and Tzain identify this character flaw and warn her accordingly. Zélie's voice amplifies the pain and anger in the embers of revolt. The psychological trauma of watching as her mother was cruelly murdered and the vacuum of her absence continue haunting Zélie. The guards serve as a constant reminder that the danger isn't past. Zélie is even more determined to free herself and others from King Saran's reign of terror.

Amari's vantage point shows her as vulnerable, weak and afraid. This proves to be a façade when she lost her maid, Binta. After this pivotal incident, the battle line is drawn. Amari's character develops in accelerating degrees. Although she is soft spoken, her moral judgment is well developed from an early age. Despite King Saran's prodding and commands, she refuses to strike her brother with the sword. After her chance meeting with Zélie, Amari emerges from feelings of guilt to feelings of courage. Her father's totalitarian rule is the stark reality she must face, after living a secluded and protected life behind the palace walls. Although Amari bears the physical scar from refusing to strike her brother Inan, the scar runs deeper when Inan is slain by the father he idolizes. In the Orinon battle, Amari fights like a seasoned warrior. All the initial training her father forced upon her comes to the surface but for a cause she truly believes in. Her agility, valour and courage are impeccable. She fights to defend the people of Orisha, not to oppress them.

The authorial voice paints Inan as an impressive young captain and prince of Orisha. He tries very hard to prove himself as a worthy heir to the throne. He is strong, handsome but manipulative. His character flaw is his lack of conviction. He is torn between obeying his father and fighting for a new Orisha. He relies heavily on his father's

approval. He decides to use his own magic to fight against the opposition, (A harsh reminder that power corrupts). This weakness buys Inan only a small moment in time before his father avenges the death of Kaea. In order to impress his father, Inan pretends to be ruthless and lies very often to cover his tracks. Events overtake his prior intentions leaving him with guilt, but he hardly takes any action to remedy the situation. Instead he follows through with his father's expectations no matter the cost. His objections are weak and his actions show cowardice. His opinions are swayed from side to side. The points of view in all the narrators prove that they are authoritative rather than ingenuous. The narrators have a level of psychological depth and development that qualifies the novel as bildungsroman. In *Children of Blood and Bone* there is also the evidence of romance a story. It can also qualify as a fictional trauma narrative depicting the struggle against a totalitarian government.

According to Svein Angelskar (2005) "existing theories about fantasy literature have not been able to adequately include the different types of genre (8)" the thesis' focus is on how mythology is used in modern fantasy literature. This scholar claims that the different kinds of fantasy make it difficult to incorporate them either as genre or a mode as it includes fantasy novels, fantasy stories, fantasy poetry, and others such as gothic low fantasy, epic high fantasy, postmodern fantasy, science fantasy, cosmic fantasy, religious fantasy, comic fantasy and so on. Angelskar acknowledges that within fantasy literature there is the use of elements belonging to a wide range of historically defined models of other genres: "Thus, the terms fantasy or the fantastic has been kept more or less interchangeably for most of these forms or subgenres (16)." Apart from the power of magic, there is a presence of mythical animals used as beasts of burden they are called panthenaires, cheetanares, lionaires and leopanares. One is described as: "a vicious leopanaire nearly as big as my hut. Eight thick horns protrude from its back, sharp and glistening in black. The monster licks its long, serrated fangs as it snarls, eager to decorate its spotted white coat with our blood (64)". On the ontological of the text, these animals do not cause antinomy because they are normal creatures which people nurture and tame just like domestic animals; these animals are used for transportation and as beasts of burden. In Ochiagha's essay, there is an emphasis on Tzvetan Todorov's argument that "the fantastic narratives involve an unresolved hesitation between the supernatural explanation available in marvelous tales and the natural or psychological explanation offered by tales of the uncanny. However, in fantastic texts, we are usually inclined towards the supernatural explanation (2)". In other words, in the fantastic, there

is a belief in existence and power of the magical. At the ending of *Children of Blood and Bone* there is no doubt as to the veracity magic.

### **3.0 Liminal Spaces in *Children of Blood and Bone***

Liminality refers to the transition from the state of realism to the magical. It is an indication of the areas in which magical realism operates. It could be geographical, or some kind of intangible presence or symbols that cause a movement in the area of operation from the real to magical. The sacred artifacts are all liminal points for magic in *Children of Blood and Bone* and so is the Chândomblé temple. This is where the trio of Zélie, Tzain and Amari come in contact with Lekan, the last sentario. Although we have glimpses of the cosmological order before of the Orishans through Zélie's memory about the tutorials she had received from her late mother. According to Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*, the cosmological order of Orisha begins with Sky Mother who created gods and men. The gods distributed Sky Mother's gifts to the first maji. The maji comprise of ten clans with their deities. These deities are adorned with different powers and abilities. The identification of the ten maji clans is made easier by the graphic presentation available in the preface of the novel. The gods realize that some of the gifted ones misuse their gift; therefore, certain required virtues must accompany the gifts. For example, Zélie's deity, Oya, shares her power with those who show wisdom and patience. As soon as Zélie approaches Chândomblé the aura of the land amplifies the ashê in her blood. The simple touch of a human skull and an image of his/her previous life flashes before their eyes. Lavender and silver lights glows from her fingers. Zélie has many more of such magical experiences inside this temple.

Although there is a notable presence of liminal objects and places, magic itself is embodied in the characters. They discover their personal powers through an encounter that ignites its manifestation. It is in a bid to avoid this encounter that King Saran hunts for the scroll. The sentaros are spiritual guardians who protect the will of the gods on earth. Their task is to connect Sky Mother's spirit to the maji on earth. The description of blood rituals performed by the majis is intended to release in full power, the magic of the supplicant's deity. The dreamscape is another liminal space which is peculiar. Inan has the ability to draw Zélie into the dreamscape and his magic allows him to enter other people's thoughts and memories. Here they speak telepathically but cannot hurt each other physically. This ability makes him a threat to Zélie although she does not recognize this early enough. In the dreamscape, Zélie can unleash her creative magical powers more than because she has more experience in magic.

*Children of Blood and Bone*, magical powers are an endowment from the gods but magic can be practiced and tamed by the user. Zélie practices her incantations and control of animations when anticipating the use her magic. She can intensify their powers through blood magic, the sacred scroll or the sunstone. These artifacts serve like transistors for the magic. Inan on the other hand, struggles to push down his magic so that his maji status will remain secret. When Inan joins forces with Zélie to save Tzain and Amari from their abductors, Zélie and Inan test the potency of their magically weaponized powers in preparation for the anticipated battle. The ashê in Zélie's blood has its physical evidence like her hair colour and the texture of her hair. Lekan notices that Zélie's hair ought to be wavy, not straight. Through Zélie's voyage to bring back magic, she begins to regain the right hair texture after various magical experiences. In contrast to the artifacts that enhance the magic is the "majacite", according to King Saran:

When I discovered the raw alloy Bratonians used to subdue magic, I thought that would be enough. With majacite, they created prisons, and weapons, and chains. Following their tactics, I did same. But even that wasn't enough to tame those treacherous maggots. If our kingdom was ever going to survive, I knew I had to take magic away (82).

This alloy serves as tangible item that actively suppresses the power of magic. But the greatest antagonist to magic is King Saran's brutal military force. Liminal points in this novel are distinct and elucidated by the authoritative narrators.

#### **4.0 *Children of Blood and Bone* as a Trauma Narrative**

In Natasha Rogers's thesis, (2004) it explores novels that portray experiences of trauma either from personal stories or issues regarding the history of indigenous peoples. These trauma experiences are further divided into historical trauma of war or personal trauma of an experience of death and trauma caused in a more general sense, by reality itself as being inherently traumatic. Rogers reiterates that novels which depict a more material sense of trauma are political in their motivation as they present the protagonist's experience as a means of raising awareness about the consequence of specific historical events. According to Rogers, the debate about the interrelationship between trauma and narrative and particularly its definition as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, is something which has been constructed through discourse: "the concept of trauma, therefore is a definitive narrative into which the diverse symptoms of trauma are fitted (5)". This makes

narrative an essential tool because to help victims walk through their trauma; it is essential to bear witness to later generations; it is necessary so that a version of events can be produced which will facilitate healing for the community and serve as a reference for comparison with other available versions which could be falsified or politically motivated.

Rogers rejects the notion of traumatic memory as being distinct from normal memory; which proposes that traumatic experiences are stored in a literal form in the mind rather than being reworked and integrated as in normal memory processes. Instead, Rogers relies on a psychoanalytically constructed concept of trauma by examining re-workings of Freud's seduction theory, providing an alternative conceptualization of trauma in terms of traumatic reality rather than actual event. She posits that, all the selected novels used for her thesis utilize general strategies such as "indeterminacy, contradiction, and the refusal of closure to create a narrative form that acknowledges its own limitations and so indicates the impossibility of adequately expressing the inexpressible whilst emphasizing the necessity of continually striving to do so (93)".

*Children of Blood and Bone* lends itself to psychoanalytic analysis because of the trauma experience caused by King Saran's raid against the maji. It becomes a major historical event in context of the novel. Many maji families collectively experienced the trauma of death and violence in the hands of King Saran's army. It is herein that Adeyemi brings in the theme of racial oppression. The perpetrated violence is clearly against the dark skinned maji while the nobles are amber eyed with lighter skinned. Many of the royal women are preoccupied with bleaching their skin complexion. According to Zélie: "we are the people who fill the king's prisons, the people our kingdom turns into laborers. The people Orishans try to chase out of their features, outlawing our lineage as if white hair and dead magic were a societal stain (27)". The maji were allowed to marry themselves or the Kosidán who are not maji or royals by birth. Saran's oppressive laws sound like Jim Crow laws. To further keep the maji under King Saran's power, he imposes a weekly increase on taxes. Failure to pay; sentences his subjects to work in the stocks to pay an ever-increasing debt. The effect of course is poverty. There are two versions of traumatic memory at play in the novel each giving a different perspective about magic. It is safe to assume that magic is a potent kind of power. What causes the greatest conflict is the question as to whether magic is desirable or not. King Saran considers magic as undesirable because his family was destroyed using magic. He remembers the death of his father, his first wife, his first son and older brother. He says the maji were drunk with



power and wanted to overthrow the nobles. This contradicts mama Agba's historical account:

The maji rose throughout Orisha becoming the first kings and queens. In that time everyone knew peace, but that peace didn't last. Those in power began to abuse their magic, and as punishment, the gods stripped them of their gifts. When the magic leached from their blood, their white hair disappeared as a sign of their sin. Over generations, love of the maji turned into fear. Fear turned into hate. Hate transformed into violence, a desire to wipe the maji away (15).

Zélie on the other hand, recounts her own traumatic childhood memory about her mother's violent death in gruesome details. She was lynched and kept in display as a warning for other maji's. The memory of her death, and the vacuum created by her absence, haunts Zélie's mind in the most painful manner. Zélie draws strength from her pain to determine that no one should ever need to experience such a catastrophe. She concludes as does her father; that unless magic returns to Orisha the maji will continually be the prey. Consequently, the perception of magic differs from both divides: for the maji, it is the right to protect themselves from abuse. For the nobles, it is a threat that can displace them from power. Both conclusions arise from traumatic memories of the past events. The underlying message in Adeyemi's novel is that power accompanied with fear and anger, breeds more violence. Both King Saran and the maji are motivated by fear. They both hold on to their traumatic memories as the reason why they must fight each other. When the Sky Mother unleashes magic on all Orishans; she gives everyone power thereby eliminating stigma and vulnerability. The novel also tells the reader that perceived differences about the maji, the nobles and Kosidan are all fabrications.

## 5.0 Conclusion

*Children of Blood and Bone* is versatile in its appeal to genres such as fantasy, trauma narratives, bildungsroman, romance, and afrofuturism. Adeyemi's creativity is delightful and humorous. It is amusing to read lines such as "villagers haggling inside their round coconut boats (22)" "forests of Sokoto (120)" "our hair is always as stark and white as the snow that covers the mountaintops of Ibadan (113)". The complexity in the resolution of the conflicts arising in the novel is admirable. Adeyemi did not fall into the temptation of a simplistic route where romantic love ends all the trouble in Orisha.

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